DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 137 043 RC 009 823

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TITLE Research and the Hispanic Elderly.
PUB DATE 14 Jan 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Research Utilization Project/The Generation Connection, Texas State Department of Public Welfare Conference (McAllen, Texas, January 14, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Gerontology; *Older Adults; *Research; *Research Needs; Research Problems; Research Utilization; *Senior Citizens; *Spanish Speaking

ABSTRACT

The current status of research on the Hispanic Elderly indicates that very little has been written. Most of the published material is dated, unreliable, inconclusive, and scattered throughout the historical and social literature world. To date, research regarding the Hispanic Community is seriously defective both statistically and in its sociological interpretation. This research is usually directed in such a way as to reveal what the "present status" is rather than what the problems' root causes are. Since research on the Hispanic Elderly does not involve a homogeneous community, researchers are seldom prepared for the wide cultural and socioeconomic spectrum exhibited in the Hispanic Community. The utilization of Hispanic researchers would do much to alleviate the problems posed by multi-ethnic composition, and the lack of comprehension on the part of the Hispanic Elderly. Therefore, efforts must be made to attract qualified Hispanic students into the field of Gerontological Research. Training programs should be initiated for non-Hispanic researchers to orientate them to pertinent ethnic considerations that will prepare them to produce meaningful research. Also the participation of the Hispanic Community in planning and implementation would greatly facilitate research efforts. Research must be coordinated on the national level to preclude duplication and promote cross-fertilization of innovative techniques and knowledge. (NQ)

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RESEARCH AND THE HISPANIC ELDERLY

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by

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presented
at the

Research Utilization Project/The Generation Connection
Texas State Department of Public Welfare
conference

"A New Wrinkle on an Old Theme--Advances, Trends, and Developments for the Spanish-Speaking Elderly"

January 14, 1977

McAllen Civic Center, McAllen, Texas

RC009823

BACKGROUND

With the advent of the amendments to the Older Americans Act of 1965 came an awareness for the need to develop and establish service centers nationwide for the Hispanic Elderly. However, many obstacles prevented such events from being realized. There simply was no clearcut definition of who the Hispanic Elderly were, what their needs consisted of, and of the benefits that would be gained from investing such time, effort, and financial resources into upgrading their quality of life. The reluctance to fund human service programs for the Hispanic Elderly stems from the belief that doing so would be purely philanthropic in nature since there are other groups with more pressing needs. It is felt that the Hispanic Elderly are a non-productive entity that will give little return for the investment. "They have outlived their usefulness to society. Besides, their families will take care of them upon retirement".

The Hispanic Elderly have distinct patterns in their style of living. Cubans and Puerto Ricans still have a specific country of origin which can be easily distinguished from their country of destination, the U.S. The majority of Mexican Americans on the other hand, are native born residents of this country. Many are descendents of the original residents of the territories annexed by the United States after the Mexican-American War while still others are descendents of the Mexico-to-U.S. migration era at the turn of the century.

The Hispanic Elderly are a minority among minorities, not only in terms of numbers but in the amount of care they will receive from the various government programs. The Spanish Speaking Elderly were heroes in the two world wars and heroes in the sugar beet fields of Kansas. They were the backbone in the development of the economy during its worst times, and

we can still see viejitos doing stoop labor in the fields from Maine to California. Yet, they have been completely neglected in the planning and policy formulation levels. The current status of research is a clear example of the neglect of this deserving group. Very little has been written on the Hispanic Elderly and the bibliography which I have handed out to you is a clear example of the limited quantity of research which has been done to date.

The Hispanic Elderly of today are a product of an ethnic group that has suffered from racial discrimination, encountered major linguistic and cultural barriers to assimilation, and occupied a low socio-economic status. Many of the Spanish Speaking seniors have little education in this country although most are literate in their native languages; therefore, research and services involving the Hispanic Elderly must be dealt with in these terms.

CURRENT STATUS OF RESEARCH

Published material specifically on the Hispanic Elderly is extremely lacking. Most of it is dated, unreliable and inconclusive, and is scattered throughout the historical and social literature world. The lack of research on the Hispanic Elderly can be attributed, for one, to the fact that research on minority groups in general is not all that stable either, so to focus on the Hispanic Elderly is often (mis)interpreted as putting the cart before the horse. At the national level, the Asociacion Nacional Pro Personas Mayores is compiling research data which encompasses needs assessments, statistical information and cultural studies for dissemination to State Offices on Aging and Area Agencies

On Aging. These studies will be synthesized into practical working models for improved services to the Hispanic Elderly.

Identifying the needs of the Hispanic Elderly is not an easy task. First of all, the target population must be identified and this poses problems of logistics and definition. The resources for providing this type of information simply do not exist. Secondly, in order to study the Hispanic population, one needs to have knowledge of the culture and lifestyle. Therefore, cognizant individuals must undertake that role. With increased interest in the Hispanic Elderly groups, comes a need for basic demographic data to provide answers to such simple questions as "How many Mexican American senior citizens are there?" "How many Puerto Ricans live in this city?" or "What are some of the characteristics of the Cuban senior population?" Normal procedure calls for consulting census publications, but as previously stated, these are all too often lacking and unreliable.

TYPES OF RESEARCH COMPLETED TO DATE

Research on the Hispanic Elderly is usually directed in such a way as to reveal what the 'present status' is rather than what the root causes of the problems are. Therefore, in trying to remedy the problem, we only cover it up and never really eliminate it. The studies are useful, however, though they are not designed to eliminate the problem in its entirety. A typical study that has been undertaken is the Feasibility Study to Assess the Health Needs of the Spanish Speaking Elderly in East Los Angeles. It was initiated as a first effort in documenting the problems in obtaining health care by Hispanic Elderly residents. It sought: A) to plan, develop and conduct a consumer health survey eliciting the perceptions of the

Mexican American Elderly within East Los Angeles regarding the health needs, health services, and health resources; B) to identify and document specific health problems, priorities of health needs, and obstacles to the delivery of health services as perceived by the target population; C) to propose alternative solutions in the form of recommendations for the problems of health care services and resources perceived by the Mexican American Elderly within the target population.

As with most feasibility studies, the data elicited by this study was of an exploratory nature. The research design, sampling methodology, and all data gathering instruments were developed according to professional standards.

This study revealed that the average educational attainment for the total Hispanic Elderly sampled was 6.3 years. As a result, these senior citizens will inevitably occupy the lower rung of the socio-economic status ladder and will not be able to afford health care. Therefore, until there is improvement in the S.E.S. of the Hispanic Elderly and a significant change in the health care services in the U.S., it is likely that the health status of this population will remain at the same level.

OBSTACLES THAT EXIST IN UNDERTAKING RESEARCH ON THE HISPANIC ELDERLY

When we speak of doing research about the Hispanic Elderly, are we speaking about a homogenous community? The answer to this question is a definite "no". Researchers are seldom prepared for the wide cultural and socio-economic spectrum exhibited in the Hispanic Community. The potential impact of this diversity on all stages of proposed research cannot be overemphasized.

Linguistic homogeneity must not be construed as an implication of homogeneity in any other respect.

The Hispanic Elderly are as a rule somewhat cynical and suspicious of governmental institutions and in particular of researchers they cannot identify with culturally. Researchers are often unaware that many Hispanic Elderly because of their isolation from the mainstream of life cannot comprehend questions that presuppose a knowledge and understanding of things that could only result from life within the mainstream.

Lack of communication among our own kind is also hurting our efforts in identifying the needs of the Hispanic Elderly. For example, Spanish Speaking Americans of Mexican descent, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Latin Americans, Central and South Americans, Mexicanos, Mexican Americans, Chicanos, Latinos, Hispanics - all these refer approximately to the same ethnic grouping.

The connotative and denotative meaning of these terms make it difficult to find one meaningful group label to which all will identify.

RESEARCH GOALS, NEEDS AND PRIORITIES

The utilization of Hispanic researchers would do much to alleviate the problems posed by multi-ethnic composition, and the lack of comprehension on the part of the Hispanic Elderly. Unfortunately, the scarcity of Hispanic researchers is acute. Efforts must be made to attract qualified Hispanic students into the field of Gerontological Research. Training programs should be initiated for non-Hispanic researchers to orientate them to pertinent ethnic considerations that will prepare them to produce meaningful

research. In addition, the participation of the Hispanic Community in planning and implementation would greatly facilitate sound and realistic research efforts.

Research on the Hispanic Elderly must be coordinated on the national level to preclude needless duplication and to promote cross-fertilization of innovative techniques and knowledge. This national focus can be effected through the Asociacion Nacional which has placed research in high priority. Presently, the Asociacion is planning a nationwide needs assessment. The findings of this assessment will bring to light the areas where research is needed. We need research that can be used practically rather than sitting and collecting dust on academicians' bookshelves.

CONCLUSION

The relatively recent concern for the elderly populations, expressed by the mobilization of resources to deliver a variety of human services, has yet to reach our Spanish Speaking Elderly community. The establishment of a chain of structures at the federal, state and local levels that act as vehicles to channel these services indeed could place the authority for planning and implementation closer to the consumer of services; the requirement to institute advisory groups seemed to ensure local input. However, most indicators point to the lack of significant participation of our Spanish Speaking Elderly in all of these structures, at all levels. The voice of the Spanish Speaking Elderly is notoriously absent from the decision making, planning, implementation and evaluation processes. The absence of this population group from these significant levels of change indicates that such structures will remain traditional and dated. Service delivery structures

reflect cummulative culture patterns and knowledge, but what might work for one group may be alien for another. It seems obvious that the understanding of cultural differences must take place before significant and useful advances can occur in the development of human services for the Spanish Speaking Elderly.

Research consumers must be made aware that research to date with respect to the Hispanic Community is seriously defective both statistically and in its sociological interpretation. The gross undercount of Hispanics in the 1970 census has greatly restricted validity of local and regional surveys. Prevalent myths such as the extended family must be dispelled. The predisposition of researchers to interpret data through a value-laden system which has been inculcated by many years of exposure to faulty work must be rectified. In short, we must clean the slate and start anew.

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